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28 April 1965

SPECIAL NATIONAL INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATE

COMMUNIST REACTIONS
TO CERTAIN US ACTIONS

CIA HISTORICAL REVIEW PROGRAM
RELEASE IN FULL

NOTE: This is the final version of the estimate and additional text will not be circulated.

Submitted by the
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

Concurred in by the
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

As indicated overleaf
28 April 1965

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The following intelligence organizations participated in the preparation of this estimate: The Central Intelligence Agency and the intelligence organizations of the Departments of State, Defense, and NSA.

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UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD

on 28 April 1965 Concurring were the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State; the Director, Defense Intelligence Agency; and the Director of the National Security Agency. The Atomic Energy Commission Representative to the USIB and the Assistant to the Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, abstained, the subject being outside of their jurisdiction.

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C E N T R A L I N T E L L I G E N C E A G E N C Y

28 April 1965

SUBJECT: SNIE 10-5-65: COMMUNIST REACTIONS TO CERTAIN US ACTIONS

THE PROBLEM

To estimate likely Communist, particularly Soviet and Chinese, reactions to non-nuclear air strikes by the US against China.

SCOPE NOTE

For the purpose of this estimate, we have made a number of assumptions about US air strikes and Communist reactions in order to consider several different situations. In Part I, we assume a case in which the initial US-strike was in response to direct and overt attacks by Chinese fighter aircraft, from Chinese bases, against US forces bombing in the DRV. In addition, we assume that the first US strike would be against the fighter base or bases from which the Chinese attacks were launched and that the US objective

Note: The judgments in this estimate are based on current evidence and the situation as of 28 April and could be modified by changing circumstances.

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was, and was stated to be, limited to making the Chinese cease their attacks.

Part I estimates Communist reactions to this initial exchange, and to similarly limited US responses to further Chinese air attacks.

In Part II, we assume that the Chinese attacks continue, and that US strikes are expanded to include other targets of military significance in South China, the stated US objective remaining the same.

In Part III, we consider Communist reaction to US air strikes expanded to include hundreds of targets of major military significance throughout China. We assume that US objectives at this point would have expanded beyond their original scope.

THE ESTIMATE

INTRODUCTION

1. The policies and tactics of the Communist powers engaged in the Vietnamese crisis have settled into a fairly definite pattern. It appears that the DRV, with strong Chinese encouragement, is determined for the present to ride out the US bombardment. Both the DRV and Communist China have hardened their attitudes toward negotiations, without categorically excluding the possibility under all conditions. They apparently believe

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that the US attacks are intended to force a settlement on US terms. They apparently calculate that the DRV can afford further punishment and that, in the meantime, US determination to persist will weaken because of increasing DRV air defense capabilities, the threat of a broader conflict, and the pressure of international and US domestic opinion. Moreover, they consider that the tide is running in their favor in the South. Hence, as the situation now stands, the Chinese probably see no need for action which would involve substantial risk of precipitating US military attacks upon their territory.

2. By contrast, the Soviets probably have had substantial doubts that the situation can be controlled, and have indicated their preference for negotiations. Hanoi has thus far rejected this option. As a result the Soviets are in a quandary. They are committed to material and political support for the DRV but have not yet demonstrated an ability to influence overall strategy. Despite a common interest in supporting the DRV, relations between the USSR and China have again worsened. The Chinese are working to prevent the growth of Soviet influence over the conduct of the Vietnamese conflict. Yet they are at the same time challenging the Soviets with increasing stridency to prove their revolutionary credentials by committing the USSR to an implacable struggle against the US in Asia.

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I. INITIAL US AIR STRIKES

Chinese Reactions

3. The Chinese air attack on a US bombing mission in the DRV might be the start of an all-out Communist offensive to drive the US out of Indochina. If so, its nature would soon become apparent, and limited US retaliation would not alter the Chinese course.

4. On the other hand, the Chinese attack might be only a single episode, intended to test whether the US regarded China as a sanctuary, or to serve as a warning of the risk of further US bombings in the DRV. In either of these cases, Peiping might pause after the initial US response, to weigh US policy and to generate various pressures on the US, trying to exploit the dangerous implications of the incident.

5. However, we do not believe that the Chinese would take so clearly provocative a step as an overt attack on US bombing missions, only to stop after a single US retaliation. They would probably have anticipated a high risk of retaliation and would have decided on a general strategy to cope with US strikes against China and to prosecute the war in South Vietnam in these new circumstances. Indeed, their decision to intervene with an air attack probably would have been intended to shore up the DRV and intimidate the US. If the limited and retaliatory nature of the

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initial US strike was made fully clear to the Chinese, they would understand that by ceasing any further efforts to interfere in US air strikes against North Vietnam they could avoid further attacks upon Chinese territory. However, they would certainly also realize that, having once engaged US planes over North Vietnam, it would be difficult for them to desist because Chinese territory had been hit, since this would cast doubt on their whole position of willingness to come to Hanoi's defense. We think that the initial US retaliatory attack would not cause the Chinese to discontinue their air attacks against the type of US bombings of North Vietnamese targets that had given rise to the initial encounter.

6. Assuming that the Chinese attacks did continue and that the US continued to retaliate with strikes limited to Chinese fighter bases, the Chinese would try to defend themselves against these strikes and would put the US under various new pressures to halt all bombings. They might put out feelers for negotiations, but without meeting US terms. At the same time, they would try by new threats and further military deployments to impress the US with their readiness for a large-scale war. Because we think they would still be seeking to avoid further escalation during this initial phase, we think the chances are less than even that they would attack US carriers or operational bases.

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7. An important reason for estimating this kind of response, rather than an immediate expansion of the direct US-Chinese conflict, is the Chinese leaders' apparent conviction that the US can be confronted and defeated in Southeast Asia by proper revolutionary tactics without bringing on a general war. The main Communist reaction would be a sharp intensification of the struggle in South Vietnam. Indeed, under certain circumstances, the initial Chinese air attacks might have been part of an agreement with Hanoi to that end. As part of this intensification, Communist infiltration into South Vietnam would be increased, and it would probably include more DRV regular troops and, if required, some Chinese personnel. The objective would be to gain effective control over South Vietnam and to destroy the political basis of the US position there.

8. Nevertheless, an air war with the US is a most disadvantageous combat for the Chinese. We think it unlikely that they would continue it for very long before deciding to take whatever political steps they considered necessary to halt the conflict, or to shift to their most effective weapon, a ground offensive. Thus in the successive phases of US air strikes which we are considering here, the Chinese would be examining these alternatives. We cannot be sure how long they would accept US bombings before choosing one of these alternatives. It would depend greatly on how the Chinese and the DRV weighed the current prospects for victory in the South against the effectiveness of US strikes in both China and North Vietnam.

9. In considering further military moves, the Chinese might fear that the US attacks had involved Chinese prestige and security to the point where failure to make a more decisive response would appear as a humiliating retreat. They might also calculate that the US, if faced with a ground offensive which threatened the destruction of its entire position in Indochina, would not carry through on a program of extended bombing. Or they might believe that even large-scale US air attacks would not irreparably damage their nation. Hence they might conclude that the gains available in Southeast Asia justified the risks involved.

10. On the other hand, they might calculate these same factors and reach the opposite conclusion. They might rate US determination as high, particularly since they probably would not regard the US as acutely apprehensive of major military reactions from the USSR. Now that China has acquired facilities for the production of advanced weapons systems, it may be much more concerned than before about their vulnerability to air attack. And the Chinese might believe that, if confronted with a massive ground invasion of Indochina, the US might quickly move to the use of nuclear weapons against China itself. Furthermore, they might judge that US bombings had already reduced or would soon significantly reduce Chinese capabilities for an invasion southward. Finally, they might believe that US bombings of China and the DRV could be halted, at least temporarily, by various political steps which would slow the pace of the Viet Cong insurgency, but not preclude its ultimate success.

11. As indicated above, we think that, if the initial Chinese air action was not part of an all-out offensive, the first US retaliation probably would not produce an immediate Chinese choice between these alternatives. As US strikes against fighter bases in South China continued, however, the pressures on the Chinese to make such a choice would rise. Although it is impossible to estimate the exact scale of retaliation which would produce a Chinese decision, we think it likely that Peiping would make its choice some time before its capabilities in South China for supporting air action had been completely destroyed.

12. There is an almost even chance that the Chinese choice would be to break off the air battle and make political moves designed to dissuade the US from continuing its bombings of the DRV. On balance, however, we think it somewhat more likely that they would make a major military response to the continuation or expansion of US strikes against China.^{1/} The exact combination and timing of military moves could vary greatly. If they had not already done so, Chinese Communist forces would probably move into North Vietnam. Chinese or additional DRV forces would probably move into Northern Laos. The DRV armed forces, with Chinese support, would probably

^{1/} The Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, believes that the Chinese are much more likely to make a military response to the US bombings, as described in the latter part of this paragraph, than to seek to dissuade the US solely through political moves. Moreover, he believes that such a response will come, if not immediately after the initial US retaliatory strike, very soon after any continuation of such retaliatory strikes.

open an offensive against South Vietnam. Thailand would be threatened, especially if its bases were used in air attacks against China. Such military moves as these might be accompanied by some probing for negotiations. Indeed, Peiping might think that, faced with this new stage in the war, the US would seek a way to bring hostilities to a close.

13. Chinese calculations in the initial stage of US bombings would not be greatly affected by the Soviet position, since the Chinese probably would not be counting on Soviet support in Southeast Asia. They would almost certainly demand that the Soviets confront the US with the threat of military intervention. Peiping would probably call on the Soviets for advanced equipment. The Chinese would hope either to gain some measure of Soviet support and seriously damage US-USSR relations or, if the Soviets hesitated to provide support, to destroy Moscow's standing among other Communists and the Afro-Asians.

14. US strikes against Chinese territory would greatly alarm large segments of world opinion, and the various Communist countries involved in the crisis would of course strenuously exploit these feelings. The more chance they saw of inhibiting the US in this fashion, the less they would be prepared to change their course.

Soviet Reactions

15. For their part, the Soviet leaders would be greatly apprehensive that a war between China and the US might expand to involve them. Their principal aim would be to halt the escalation, and they would probably hope to have more influence on the US than on China. We would expect Soviet threats and warnings, along with overtures for a cease-fire or negotiations. On the one hand, they would try to impress the US that the USSR would have no choice but to support its Communist ally. On the other hand, Moscow would endeavor to restrain the Chinese by privately indicating to them that they could not count on the USSR to use its own forces or nuclear power to support China's war in Southeast Asia.

16. These US attacks would point up the fundamental arguments between the USSR and China about strategy and tactics in confronting the US and would sharpen the Soviet dilemma. Nevertheless, it is likely that the Soviets would agree to supply China with military equipment of a strategically defensive character, including air defense missiles and advanced fighters. Though they could not afford the political cost of rejecting a Chinese request, they would probably bargain on types and quantities of aid and on terms, and would place some political qualifications on their assistance, demanding a greater voice in the conduct of Communist policy in Southeast Asia. The Soviets would probably offer

personnel for technical assistance and to man the advanced equipment, perhaps in the guise of "volunteers" or without any formal acknowledgement of their participation.

17. It is possible that the Soviets would calculate that, by putting some important US or Western interest in jeopardy elsewhere in the world, they could force the US to pause or reverse its course in Vietnam and China. In general, the Soviets have avoided such tactics in past crises, evidently fearing that this sort of multiplication of tensions might engender in the US a sense of a general showdown. We think that this attitude will continue to govern Soviet policy, although we are somewhat less certain that the new Soviet leaders will adhere to this pattern. In any case, it is very unlikely that the USSR would take military action outside Southeast Asia.

DRV Reactions

18. Assuming that US attacks against the DRV were growing, Hanoi might believe that its fate was becoming subordinate to the larger struggle, and this might become a source of difference between the DRV and China. On the other hand, the DRV would be encouraged by the increased Chinese commitment. In any case, we do not believe that the differences between Peiping and Hanoi would be such as to impair the present degree of cooperation in the war effort.

II. EXPANDED US AIR STRIKES AGAINST OTHER SOUTH CHINA MILITARY TARGETS

Chinese Reactions

19. Assuming that the US expanded its air strikes to include other military targets in South China, this action would almost certainly force a new decision by Peiping. As indicated above, we think it likely that the Chinese and the DRV would already have elected to escalate the war by various military moves, including a DRV offensive against the South. If this had not yet occurred, then the first few US strikes at other military targets in South China would probably bring on such an attack.

20. Further, the expansion of US bombings would probably convince the Chinese that attacks on northern China would soon follow. If they had not yet attacked US carriers or operational bases, they would probably do so. If Chinese troops had not yet moved into North Vietnam or Laos, they would probably do so. It is possible also that regular Chinese forces would move into South Vietnam, and Chinese or DRV forces might push beyond the northern provinces of Laos.

21. We do not believe that the Chinese would try to counter expanded US bombing actions by initiating large-scale fighting outside Southeast Asia. Tension would probably rise in the Taiwan Strait, but the Chinese would probably not at this point initiate action against Taiwan unless

faced with an invasion attempt by Chinese Nationalist forces or attacks on China from Taiwan bases. Korea is a special case. In a recent interview, Mao stated that if an East Asian war involved North Korea, the Soviets would almost certainly have to get involved. If indeed Mao believes this, it is possible that, under continued and damaging US attacks, Peiping would try to renew the war in Korea as a means of bringing the USSR into the conflict. But even if the Chinese wished to reopen hostilities in Korea, under the circumstances considered here North Korea would probably seek to dissuade them. If hostilities nevertheless began, we believe that the USSR could not long remain aloof. Moscow would probably limit its active participation, however, to the provision of materiel and of special units employing advanced conventional equipment such as SAMs.

Soviet Reactions

22. The expansion of US air attacks to other military targets in South China would provoke an atmosphere of general world crisis and put the USSR under increasing pressure. However, we do not believe that these attacks would unite Moscow and Peiping in a solid alliance. In fact, we believe that the Soviet leaders might derive some satisfaction from the feeling that the error of the Chinese line was being demonstrated to the world at large. They would nevertheless also feel a strong desire to deter the US and an urgent necessity to display solidarity toward a socialist

ally under attack. Accordingly, the Soviets would respond to this requirement with the most intense kind of propaganda, and possibly some demonstrative incidents designed to convince the US that its actions were jeopardizing the ground rules which had governed the use of military force in previous crises. But Soviet actions would probably still be measured. If they had not already done so, the Soviets would probably provide supplies and equipment, particularly air defense equipment, including SAMs and fighter aircraft, and the necessary associated personnel.

23. The Soviets would have to consider again the advisability of generating crises elsewhere intended to press the US to desist. We believe that, as the US-Chinese conflict expanded, the inhibitions on this tactic would rise rapidly. In particular, we think it unlikely that the USSR would openly undertake direct engagement with US forces, so long as it saw no direct threat to Soviet territory or to the existence of a Communist regime in China.

III. EXTENSIVE US BOMBING THROUGHOUT CHINA

Chinese Reactions

24. We have estimated that the continuation and especially the expansion of US bombing of South China would force a critical decision on the Chinese. But if they had refrained from such a decision, we believe

that the first few US attacks against other regions would precipitate the Chinese decision. And long before the US air campaign had reached the level of attacks on hundreds of targets of major military significance throughout China, the Chinese would, in our view, have felt compelled either to engage the US in large-scale hostilities or to move openly toward at least temporary conciliation.

25. US willingness to take the critical step of bombing throughout China would almost certainly cause Peiping to conclude that the US was determined to wage a full-scale war, perhaps including the eventual use of nuclear weapons. Thus there is a chance that the Chinese, if they had deferred a choice to this point, would now decide that it was necessary to halt the conflict and shift for a time to political tactics.

26. We believe, however, that they would probably respond with a combination of major military moves in Southeast Asia, as outlined in paragraphs 12 and 20. Further, since the US would have already demonstrated a readiness to bomb North China, Peiping would probably judge that a general showdown had arrived and would engage the US with all the forces at its disposal.

Soviet Reactions

27. The USSR would at this level of crisis come under extraordinary pressure. It would have to consider on the one hand the possibility that

the existence of a Communist regime in China was in jeopardy, and on the other the danger of general nuclear war. Peiping would be vigorously insisting that Moscow come to its defense and in some way bring US attacks to a halt. In these circumstances, the USSR would almost certainly make a considerable effort, on an emergency basis, to sustain Chinese war fighting capabilities. At the same time, the USSR would also make a maximum effort to stop the war through political action, particularly by mobilizing world opinion against the US and persuading China to negotiate.

28. Beyond this, so much would depend upon the circumstances in which the crisis had developed that Soviet reaction cannot be anticipated. The Soviets would probably still believe that the US was not bent on attacking the USSR. Hence, we believe that the USSR would not attack US forces outside China, initiate the use of nuclear weapons, or provide them to China. We believe that Soviet actions would be calculated to limit the risk to further escalation, but we cannot be sure that Moscow would correctly calculate these risks.